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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed random samples of the junior high school, college, and adult population groups in Tucson, Arizona, for reading habits, self-perceived reading abilities, and the ability to retain information read in local newspapers. The survey data indicate that members of all three groups believe that they comprehend more than their peers, that they enjoy reading more than their peers, and that they actually read more than their peers. Analysis of the surveyed reading habits shows that junior high school students in Tucson read more books but fewer magazines and newspapers than the other two groups, and that the adults relied more on reading materials as a news source than the other two groups. No significant differences were found between groups in their ability to retain information read in local newspapers. The study concludes that its results are in striking contrast to the popular assumption that more and more people are reading less and less. (RL)

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Self-Perceptions and Reading Habits of Adolescents, College Students, and Adults

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A popular conception exists that more and more people are reading less and less: that the folks in the real world are aliterate. That is, they could read if they chose to do so, but that, for the most part, people do not choose to do so. Mikulecky reported three surveys in the 1976 NRC Yearbook which certainly bear witness to this idea: one survey indicated that only 1% of the adult population completes a book per year; a second survey suggested that only 25% of all adults read in a book per month; and a third survey

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reported that 58% of the population "never read, never finished" a book.

This assertion and these surveys provided the impetus for this study. Three randomly selected groups were chosen: 1) junior high students; 2) college students; and 3) adult readers. The subjects were surveyed to examine and compare their reading behaviors within three parameters:

1) their reading abilities as self-perceived;
2) their self-reported reading habits; and
3) their ability to answer an objective-type measure of reading retention.

By examining and comparing these three groups, the assertion that the general population does not choose to read could be rejected or supported, at least for people in Tucson, Arizona, across three age groups.

Method

Subjects

The random sample of the adult population was achieved as follows. A computer was used to generate random numbers which determined the page, column, and line numbers from the local telephone directory. Once potential subjects were identified and reached by telephone, they were asked to participate in the reading survey. Seven refused initially, three failed to complete the entire survey, and 199 res-

ponded fully to all items. The demographic data that were gathered on these 199 were then compared with recent census data published on the community at large. In all cases, the obtained results were within ± 1% of the published results. The 199 respondants had an average age of 37, an average income of $12,500, and an average education of 13.5 years. The group was 85.5% anglo, 13.5% latin-american and 1% other.

The college students were surveyed with questionnaires distributed in liberal arts classes. Seven classes were randomly selected to be questioned. Questionnaires were completed by 173 subjects. The average age of this group was 20 years, the average family income was $15,500, and the average personal education was 14 years.

The junior high students were also sampled with questionnaires handed out in regular school classes. Two classes were randomly selected from each of four public Tucson junior high schools. A total of 199 students completed the questionnaire. The average age was 13 years, the average family income $16,000, the average education was 8 years, and the racial balance was essentially the same as the sample of the community at large.

Questions were chosen for their suitability from the headlines of the two Tucson newspapers from the previous week. One or two words from the headline were then changed, added, or omitted in such a manner as to give the new headline an opposite or greatly altered

meaning. For example: "City council votes to raise water rates" became "City council votes to lower water rates" and "Energy policy to raise prices--lower comfort" became "Energy policy to lower prices--raise comfort." These altered headlines were presented as true-false type questions preceded by a warning that the questions were 'tricky' and that care should be exercised in answering. No questions asked by the subjects about the items were answered although the individual items were repeated upon request as often as necessary.

Procedures

The subjects, then, were randomly selected and completed the data-gathering instrument either via a telephone interview or on a dittoed handout. The subjects' responses were then analyzed. The analysis consisted of (1) Pearson-Product-Moment Correlations coefficients to compare variables across all three groups with a decision rule of $p \leq .05$; (2) calculation of each group's mean responses to each of the items; and (3) t-tests for differences (a two-tailed test) between the means of the adult sample and the junior high sample, the adult sample and the college-age sample, and the college sample and the junior-high sample. Once again, a decision rule of $p \leq .05$ was made.

The Survey Instrument

All subjects were asked the same questions whether on the telephone or on a dittoed handout. The questions were organized into

four different types. The first type were questions related to reading habits: how often newspapers, newsmagazines, trade magazines, general magazines, and fiction and non-fiction books were read; frequency of trips to the library; what sections of the newspaper were usually read thoroughly; primary source of news; and number of books owned.

The second type of questions related to the subjects' self-perceptions of their reading abilities as compared with others about their own age. The subjects responded to the following statements by choosing one of three degree-related statements (i.e. somewhat, more, somewhat less etc.): (1) compared with people your own age do you think you read; (2) compared to people your own age do you think you comprehend; (3) compared to people your own age do you feel you like to read; and (4) compared to people your own age how much do you think you read.

The third type of questions were designed to ascertain demographic characteristics of the subjects: age, income, education, sex, and race were included as demographic data.

The final category of questions was an objective type quiz to test retention of newspaper information.

Results

The average member of each of the population groups perceived that they comprehended more of what they read, enjoyed reading more,

and actually read more than the average person their own age. These results were all statistically significant according to the stated decision rule.

A positive correlation existed between newspaper readership and the feelings of the members of all groups about their reading. Also, in general, there were positive correlations between the amount of fiction and non-fiction read per year and the feelings of all groups about their reading. Positive correlations also existed between all of the separate questions concerning feelings about reading. Additionally, there was a positive correlation between reported enjoyment of reading and quiz scores.

College students thought they read more than people their own age to a significantly greater degree than the general adult in the random sample. Junior high students felt they read faster and comprehended more than people their own age to a significantly greater extent than members of the other two groups. Also they (Junior high students) reported reading significantly more fiction than either the general adult population (about 200% more) or the college students (about 300% more). They reported reading more non-fiction than the college students (about 100% more) although this difference was not found to be statistically significant; however, they reported reading statistically significantly more than members of the general adult random sample (about 140% more). Also junior high students

read significantly fewer newspapers and newsmagazines than either the general adult population or the college students.

College students made significantly more trips to the library monthly than did junior high students who, in turn made significantly more trips than did members of the general adult population (10/month, 7/month, 3/month respectively).

The general adult population tended to rely on reading material as their primary source of news, as opposed to television or radio, to a significantly greater degree than either the college or junior high students.

No significant differences were found between the population groups in their scores on the quiz designed to estimate reading retention. All groups averaged about 58% correct responses. The only response which was positively correlated with quiz score across all population groups was the extent to which respondants felt they enjoyed reading. Newspaper readership correlated with quiz score in the junior high and college groups but not in the general adult population group.

The results of this survey were particularly surprising in that the amount of reading done by these groups was a good deal greater than predicted (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Conclusions

Junior high students are particularly positive in their self-perceived reading abilities and it appears that this confidence is justified. They read considerably more books than the members of the other groups, although they do read fewer newspapers and magazines, tending to rely more heavily on radio and television as their primary source of news than members of the other groups. This greater reliance on television and radio however does not seem to diminish their knowledge of current events compared with members of the other groups.

As mentioned above, Tucsonans reported reading far more than the previously reported studies would suggest. This result indicates that perhaps people are reading more than has been previously thought.

One of the most uniform and consistent patterns that emerged clearly showed that the more these subjects read the more diversified their reading became. This diversification was accompanied by an increase in positive feelings toward reading and their abilities as readers.

Also, across all age groups, the subjects' self perceptions about reading and their reported reading behaviors were very similar. This tends to support general folkloric notions that "either people do well at what they enjoy or they enjoy what they do well," even to the point of intellectual behaviors such as reading.

References

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Table 1

Mean Number of Reading Materials Read Per Year

Group	Newspapers	News Magazines	Trade Magazines	Fiction	Non-Fiction
General Population	312	32.4	28.8	21	15
College Students	395.2	39.6	9.6	15	19
Junior-High Students	254.8	25.2	6.0	59	35